

1. Introduction on College Level Writing Pedagogy and Writing Placement.

Although the study of rhetoric is ancient and foundational to the liberal arts, the systematic study and teaching of English composition (or writing) is a relatively new discipline. "Rhet/comp" as it is known today was only formalized in the last century in the US, and since the 1960s-70s has seen a burgeoning growth in theories, pedagogies, and approaches that has mirrored the growth of methodological approaches in the humanities generally. Feminism, critical theories of language, and cognitive science have all influenced writing pedagogy and indeed the very definitions of the field. As a result, any group of practitioners in rhetoric and composition will give differing definitions of the discipline, its goals, and how student work ought to be assessed. The vitality of the discipline, coupled with the emergence of new media technologies of literacy, have created a field in a constant state of flux. Many productive questions vex the discipline: What role should personal expression play in the study of writing? Is writing about process or product? How much should college writing emphasize grammar, usage, mechanics, and syntax? What, moreover, should students write *about*?

Writing as a discipline collects skills and methods and ways of thinking and seeing, but not content or specific ideas. As a result, most standardized placement tests can only reliably assess a student's mastery of essay form and mechanics in writing -- not whether they can think critically or examine evidence, conduct research, revise and edit, or conceive of their writing as a social or political act. Placement tests of course can only measure what they are designed to measure. Perhaps because different rhetoric and composition instructors value different aspects of the discipline and differ so widely in their methodologies, it may be difficult for any department or institution to agree on whether incoming students ought to be assessed, and what instrument ought to be used, and what that information might be used for.

Among Oregon's seven public universities, only one (Oregon Institute of Technology) requires Writing and Reading placement examinations for incoming students (Accuplacer Reading and Writeplacer). The other institutions either do not require any Writing placement test, or offer it as an optional diagnostic test (Oregon State University). These latter also make use of internally developed tests (Portland State and University of Oregon). The remainder of this report will focus on Accuplacer's Reading and Writing assessments and their alignment with the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts.

Recent research suggests that skepticism about the efficacy or value of Writing placement exams is warranted. While Scott-Clayton (2012) finds that while most placement exams are "better than nothing" in predicting success in college level courses, her research posits that math placement exams have much higher rates of validity in predicting success. The error rates for predicting ELA or Writing success were much greater, and moreover GPA for high school English was of relatively small value as a predictor because grading standards for ELA are "notoriously subjective."

Sullivan and Nielsen (2009) on the other hand, find that Accuplacer's Writing and Sentence Skills tests are valuable, though not necessarily as predictors of success in college level courses or as placement instruments. The researchers found after taking Accuplacer's Sentence Skills test that "It is not an easy test to do well on, and it does indeed appear to measure the kind of critical thinking skills that ACCUPLACER claims it does." They found the Accuplacer tests to be broad measures of a student's

cognitive abilities, though not necessarily a predictor of success or failure in a college level course. The researchers note that when students fail in school, it is often for non-academic reasons.

WritePlacer (the essay prompt exam) is now machine scored, and recent research suggests that automatic essay scoring produces lower failure rates than human scoring (Wang and Brown, 2007). More research is needed on this emerging area of investigation: human vs. machine scoring of essay writing.

Research on the broad alignment between CCSS ELA and standardized tests is mixed. Beach (2011) notes that whereas CCSS ELA standards focus on synthesis and interpretation, many state standardized tests focus mostly on reading comprehension as demonstrated in multiple choice tests. The basic “five paragraph essay prompt” that is characteristic of both WritePlacer and most state level tests is inconsistent with CCSS emphasis on argument and persuasion. It seems that when it comes to ELA, the content is generally neutral; what matters are the higher order linguistic and cognitive skills being exhibited, and *how those skills are assessed and measured*. Different states, different curricula, and different districts and instructors create assessments that match their own values for ELA. The lack of alignment is also a lack of agreement within the field on the meaning of its essential elements.

Because basic Reading and Language skills are embedded within higher order language skills, they can be difficult to separate out, though Accuplacer’s Reading and Sentence Skills tests do appear valid measures of basic reading and mechanical competency, even if they do not predict success in college writing very well. But, placement testing in general will not align with higher order skills that are longitudinally expressed, such as research, revision, and editing. And placement tests do little or nothing to recognize the importance of networked learning and collaboration in modern writing study. As Beach (2011)notes:

Future alignment research also needs to examine how implementing the CCSS will be consistent with 21st-century cultures of learning constituted by collaboration, interactivity, connectivity, and multimodal communication mediated by use of new literacy/digital tools (Davidson, 2010; Thomas & Brown, 2011).

CCSS seem to recognize the importance of collaborative, situated learning--something that is difficult to test for in a placement examination.

Interestingly, Beach cites a study saying that most states do not plan to align CCSS with higher education curricula (Rentner, 2011). Given how few OUS institutions are doing writing placement testing (or diagnostic assessment, except on a voluntary basis), there seems to be little movement at present in Oregon toward alignment of college writing instruction or assessment with Common Core.

2. Overview of the ELA Common Core Standards.

The ELA standards are meant to be "aligned with college and work expectations." These standards are far more comprehensive than the most popular placement tests (Accuplacer and Compass). ELA is a cross disciplinary set of reading, writing, research, and verbal expression skills displayed across

numerous disciplinary and content areas. Alignment with CCSS ELA standards for history, social studies, and literature cannot be measured by the current placement tests under review, as they are not part of the purview of most placement testing.

Similarly, most current placement tests are not designed to assess a number of the College and Career Readiness (CCR) Anchors around research and information evaluation. Placement tests only measure what they are designed to measure: reading comprehension, sentence level skills, adherence to the mechanical and grammatical conventions of standard written English, basic critical thinking, and basic essay organization and writing.

Some keywords and phrases from the Introduction that characterize the focus of the ELA CCR Anchor Standards:

- "close, attentive reading" that is characteristic of "complex works of literature"
- "critical reading"
- "thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts"
- The standards are meant to develop, over time, the facilities of "cogent reasoning and use of evidence" that are essential to engaged participation in a democracy.

These standards are characteristic of "cross disciplinary literacy" -- critical reading and writing skills that are applicable in a variety of curricular areas, and are not exclusive to English, literature, or rhetoric and composition. The skills build upon each other year by year until they reach higher level skills in high school years. They focus on required achievements and results rather than a specified curriculum. This seems to leave a lot of leeway for professional judgment of teachers and curriculum designers.

The 6-12 ELA standards are divided into two sections, one for ELA, the other for history/social studies, science and technical subjects. This division recognizes the importance of reading and writing across the curriculum at this level. CCSS ELA maintains that teaching literacy is a "shared responsibility."

It is worth noting that Accuplacer reading and WritePlacer seem also to reflect this integrated view of reading and writing across the curriculum by using sample readings and prompts that come from a range of subject matters, and are in no way tests of any particular literary or cultural knowledge or competency.

CCSS ELA are linked to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) standards that reflect a premium on reading/literacy skills across content areas, or independent of content areas. In the higher grades, there is greater emphasis on informational rather than literary text analysis.

CCR Anchors examine and incentivize the teaching of writing for several key rhetorical purposes: among these are *persuasion*, *explanation*, and *conveying experience*.

The lower grade level standards are focused on all three equally. By the later grades, the emphasis shifts to *persuasion* and *explanation*, rather than *conveying experience*.

On the relationships between CCR and Grade Level standards:

"The CCR and high school (grades 9–12) standards work in tandem to define the college and career readiness line—the former providing broad standards, the latter providing additional specificity. Hence, both should be considered when developing college and career readiness assessments."

K-8 uses grade level targets; 9-12 uses "two year bands" to allow for flexibility in the creation of HS course design.

The standards mandate outcomes, not means; therefore instructional methodologies are not prescribed.

What is Not Covered by the Standards

1. What ought to be taught, and how (not content). Although the Standards make references to some foundational Western and US texts, these are not assumed as part of the curriculum.
2. Advanced work, or advanced placement courses.
3. Interventions or methods for students who are not meeting benchmarks. Similarly, Standards are silent on interventions or methods for ELL students. They are also meant to be adaptable for students with special needs and disabilities.
4. CCSS do not define the full range of college and career readiness, just the academic standards.

3. Comparison of ACCUPLACER Reading and Writing Testing Areas with Common Core Standards.

*For the purposes of this analysis, I am taking the K-5 standards as already mastered by any native English reader & writer of English who applies to an institution of higher learning. **The Accuplacer reading and sentence skills tests, given the relative complexity of most of their questions, seems to make this same assumption.***

6-12 CCR Anchor Standards for Reading vs. Accuplacer Reading:

CCR Anchor Standards for Reading Informational Texts

Note: CCR Anchor standards do not change for K-8 or 9-12. Standards that appear as *italics* are not included in the Accuplacer tests.

Key ideas and Detail:

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. (9-10)
2. Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text. (9-10)

3. *Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.* **Does not seem to be covered by any of the Accuplacer tests analyzed.**

Craft and Structure:

4. *Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).* **None of the Accuplacer tests analyzed include vocabulary acquisition or inference questions.**

5. Analyze in detail how an author's ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter).

6. Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

Both 5 and 6 are tested in Accuplacer Reading test.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

7. *Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.*

8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

9. *Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech, King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), including how they address related themes and concepts.*

Neither (7) nor (9) are specifically addressed in any Accuplacer test.

CCR Anchor Standards for Writing

Because the Accuplacer Writeplacer assessment is a timed, single essay examination, only a few of the CCR Anchor Standards for Writing can fit into the test format. *Italicized items* are not covered by any of the Accuplacer test prompts. It is doubtful that any timed essay examination of 300-600 words can assess a student's ability to

- develop complex narratives,
- revise, edit, and rewrite,
- conduct research and collaborate with others using technology,
- write routinely over extended time frames.

A single short timed essay examination *can* assess some key areas that are described by the CCR anchor standards such as writing arguments to support claims, maintaining a focus on an idea over the body of an essay, and maintain clarity and coherence.

Text Types and Purposes

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

3. *Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.*

Production and Distribution of Writing

4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

5. *Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.*

6. *Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.*

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

7. *Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.*

8. *Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.*

9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Range of Writing

10. *Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audience*

4. Summary: Where Does ACCUPLACER Fail to Align with Common Core ELA?

CCSS ELA Areas Not Covered by ACCUPLACER

- Literature: reading comprehension areas like point of view, narrative structure, figurative language, connotation, and the evaluation and recognition of different genres (poetry, drama, fiction).
- Research: long term research; editing and revision; use of digital media
- Speaking and Listening: presenting information or findings of data to a group
- Language: vocabulary acquisition - determining the meaning of unfamiliar words based on surrounding context.

ACCUPLACER's reading and WritePlacer tests are meant to measure basic reading, critical thinking, and writing skills in some detail *without relying on any specific domain of knowledge, or familiarity with any literary texts*. And, as there is no requirement for literature or cultural knowledge specific to College Writing or Composition, it makes sense that the test would remain as neutral as possible with regard to the content; the content is a vehicle for testing the skills covered by the exam, rather than a specific domain to be tested.

Should Accuplacer's Reading and Writing Placement Exams Align More Closely with Common Core?

College Board, the non-profit corporation that owns and develops the Accuplacer group of placement tests as well as the SAT, recently published their own internal assessments of SAT and Readistep's¹ alignment with Common Core (Vasavada, Carman, Hart, and Luisier 2010). College Board touts its own involvement in the creation, alignment, and implementation of Common Core standards. Their own findings on alignment with Common Core, which can be summarized as follows.

Common Core Standards:

- Readistep: linked to CC ELA, Grade 7-8
- PSAT/NMSQT: linked to CC ELA, Grade 9-12
- SAT: linked to ELA 11-12, and Anchor CCR standards

The authors conclude:

"There is strong alignment between the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading and the reading sections of the PSAT/NMSQT and the SAT. . . There is strong alignment between the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing and the writing section of the SAT and partial alignment with the PSAT/NMSQT. . . The College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language are entirely addressed by both the PSAT/NMSQT and the SAT" (7).

The foregoing analysis shows that Accuplacer reading and writing placement tests, as they are currently conceived and administered, were not intended to align fully with Common Core ELA, even if they do align in certain areas. If College Board's own assessment of the alignment between Readistep, PSAT, and SAT with Common Core is correct, it is worth asking whether it is reasonable to expect greater alignment between Common Core ELA and an assessment instrument normally used to determine whether a given student needs remediation. Moreover, the Smarter Balanced consortium will presumably make greater strides toward alignment with Common Core, as that was its intent from the beginning. Accuplacer may be a rather blunt instrument when compared with SAT ELA and Smarter Balanced. Accuplacer may continue in use as a voluntary or required assessment of readiness for college writing, but it seems unlikely to match SAT or Smarter Balanced in its alignment with Common Core ELA. Common Core has yet to be fully implemented, and so it will be a number of years before the incoming class of traditional college freshmen will have gone through the Common Core standards in K-12. Furthermore, as more and more "non-traditional" students -- who never have and never will be taught the Common Core -- enter the pipeline we may see an increase in the required and voluntary use of placement and diagnostic instruments like Accuplacer for those students who do not fit within the Common Core scheme.

¹ Readistep is a middle school assessment testing students' potential college readiness. See <http://readistep.collegeboard.org/>

Accuplacer Questions	Corresponding College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standard	Corresponding Grade Level Standards and Progressive Skills	Fit or Type of Correspondence (Comments)
<p><u>Sentence Skills; 2 types:</u> Sentence Correction Construction Shift Error Types:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recognizing Complete Sentences ● Distinguish and use Soordination vs. Subordination ● Sentence-level Logic 	<p>CCR Anchor Standards for Language (6-12)² Conventions of Standard English</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking . . . <p>Knowledge of Language</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Apply knowledge of language to understand how language works in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning and style 	<p>L3.1f: subject/verb agreement L4.1f: complete sentences L6.1d: correct pronoun/antecedent L7.1c: place phrases and clauses within a sentence L9-10.1a: Parallel Structure</p>	<p>The Sentence Skills test may have the tightest alignment with CCSS ELA in that it tests easily identifiable skills that produce clear definitions of correctness vs. error.</p>

² Common Core Standards for English Language Arts (p. 25).

<p><u>Reading Comprehension, 2 types:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading a passage and answering questions on content • Identifying sentence relationship between two sentences: restatement, example, reinforcement, negation, etc. <p>Skills Tested:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying main idea • Secondary or supporting idea • Inferences and Applications 	<p>CCR Anchor Standards for Reading (6-12)³</p> <p>Key Ideas and Details:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Read closely to determine what a text says specifically and make logical inferences . 2 determine central ideas or themes. . . <p>Craft and Structure:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text . . . 2 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs . . . relate to the whole <p>Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Read and comprehend complex literary or informational texts independently and proficiently 	<p>(Reading Skills 1-12 are not maintained over time the same way Language Skills are. Standards change somewhat from grade to grade)</p> <p>Correspondence and alignment is strongest in 8th Grade Skills/Standard</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Cite evidence for what a passage says explicitly, and by inferences 2 “Identifying Main Idea” and its relationship to other ideas 3 “Analyze how a text makes connections” among and between individuals, ideas, or events. 	<p>ACCUPLACER makes no attempt to test vocabulary strength, or the ability to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words from surrounding context. CCSS ELA places a high value on vocabulary development across the ELA standards.</p>
<p><u>WritePlacer:</u> Write a 300-600 word essay on an assigned topic, taking a position on it. "Be sure to defend your position with logical support and examples" Assessed on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus/Clarity: does it show a clear purpose and consistent focus? • Organization: Are the ideas well organized? • Development and Support: Is the essay developed logically? 	<p>CCR Anchor Standards for Writing (6-12)⁴</p> <p>Text Types and Purposes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence 2 Write informative/explanatory texts 	<p>9-12 Writing Standards:⁵</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. write arguments to support claims of substantive topics or texts...: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> b. Develop claims and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly c. Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of a text, create cohesion, clarify the 	<p>Writeplacer is machine scored; ACCUPLACER reports that accuracy of machine scoring exceeds that of human scoring for on-demand-essay writing. Because essay writing in education is usually a process that includes planning, research, drafting, and revision, an on-demand essay</p>

³ Common Core Standards for English Language Arts (p. 35).

⁴ Common Core Standards for English Language Arts (p. 41).

⁵ Common Core Standards for English Language Arts (p. 45).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sentence Variety and Style: Does the essay show control of sentence structure and style? ● Mechanics and usage: Does the essay show strong control of mechanical conventions? ● Critical thinking: Does the writing exhibit clear and reasoned analysis of an issue? 	<p>to convey information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.</p> <p>3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events . . .</p> <p>Production and Distribution of Writing</p> <p>1 Produce clear and coherent writing . . .</p> <p>2 Develop by planning, revising, editing . . .</p> <p>3 Use technology . . . to produce writing in collaboration with others</p> <p>Research</p> <p>1 Conduct short as well as more sustained research</p> <p>2 Gather relevant print and digital information . .</p> <p>3 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts.</p>	<p>relationships between claims and reasons. . .</p> <p>d. Establish and maintain a formal style.</p> <p>2.a. Introduce a topic, organize complex ideas. . . so that each new element builds on what precedes it. .</p> <p>b. Develop topic thoroughly by selection of evidence</p> <p>4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</p>	<p>cannot assess student abilities to perform these essential functions of writing. Similarly, Writeplacer is not designed to assess student's thoughtful use and selection of non-print media, such as video and web-resources.</p>
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Notes: Text highlighted in yellow indicates a core standard not covered by Writeplacer. CCSS Standards and CCR Anchors in this chart are selected for relevance to this assessment, not comprehensive. For a full list, see *Common Core Standards for English Language Arts* (2012).